

“As I thought... Yeong-ji was right.”

Someone in a lab coat entered and broke the silence.

Nanseul made way for the scientist. It was a familiar face, the same person seen overseeing the experiment alongside Jumsoon and operating the machines in the footage Rikako showed me.

Judging from his indifference, I suspect Nanseul snuck that man in when he and Rikako had first infiltrated the place.

“That result is a first even for you, isn’t it, Aseah?”

Jumsoon takes a step back so the man she called Aseah can speak freely.

His eyes seemed to be locked on something far beyond his surroundings. It was as if he deemed the incapacitated Ring underlings or Rikako’s body lying on the floor unworthy of his gaze.

It appeared as though Aseah was observing me through the glass wall all this time.

“The glass window... is a technology that can superimpose worlds upon each other, albeit in a blurry state.”

“Even though it’s not as stable as the mirror, it’s capable of superposing a larger number of worlds.”

His eyes carefully examine my body in detail. Scanning through my limbs that have taken different forms, going from the right arm to the left, then my torso, left and right leg, tracing over like a slithering snake.

“And most of all...”

The curious stare of his emotionless eyes eventually met mine and stopped there.

More precisely, he was seeing the eyes of many different Garnets layered over them.

“Oh...”

I could see an exotic sparkle in his eyes.

“I’m amazed by that man’s ability to bear it all.”

“Of course he can. He’s a gem discovered by yours truly.”

“Emotions flooding in from all manner of worlds must be fighting for control as we speak, yet he is able to stand his ground without being swept away...”

His assessment of my current state was accurate.

As he put it, my mind was being fractured into pieces, various pain-filled sounds echoing within. Pleas to look at my scars, pleas to see my suffering; raging, crying, screaming in resentment of my adversary, myself, or the world as a whole.

Different though they are in approach, all the instances of pain are equal in pitch. With each blink of an eye, I had to withstand moments that removed me from my own self to return here.

Aseah nods in marvel.

“Ah... So you...have learned how to maintain the focus.”

I looked up at him.

“That’s why you were able to keep your mind as your own...despite embracing so many panes that not a trace of your original exterior remains.”

“.....”

“There still are foggy spots here and there...but those can be clarified with no problem. And then... Once I do...”

Unable to contain his thrill, he gapes wide.

“Ultimately...it could become a Singularity to surpass the mirror of my friend Yi Sang’s creation! All it took was curving the refraction rate slightly...and the things it achieved...”

Refraction rate.

I’ve heard that term before. In Lapis’s footage, Jumsoon ordered researchers to raise it far past the normal amount, and that scientist did as she told, in spite of the concerns he raised. Consequently, the children shattered miserably.

“A higher refraction rate means you yield more of your heart to the glass window. But, it allows for more panes of glass to stack. It can only be successful if you master the delicate act of perishing your heart without killing it. Like you are doing right now.”

Meaning, the kids who regressed into cocooned forms...

Were faced with as many—or perhaps thousands more—worlds of their reflected selves as I did, and couldn’t withstand it.

“Now tell me, little gem. How were you able to achieve it without any prior experience?”

“.....”

“I beg you, young friend. This has the potential to be greater than the mirror technology. My glass window can rise above all its competitors of the same nature! Ah, let’s put aside rubbish like the water or the puddle. Such luck-dependent things aren’t worthy of being considered scientific.”

“Such passion... It really was worth risking N Corp’s pursuit to bring you here, Aseah.”

Jumsoon says, making satisfied eyes at Aseah.

And all of this disgusts me to the core.

“...It’s simple.”

So I decided to give them a piece of insight they seek so dearly.

Mustering the strength to get this choked voice out of my throat.

“I have”

“Hmmh? What did you say, Garnet? Did the Red Gaze hand something over to you?”

Jumsoon approaches the glass wall to hear me better, to observe me closely for any precious techniques Mr. Vergilius might have granted me.

What did she expect.

Of course I wouldn’t possess anything impressive like that.

Though he gave me his gladius and coat, I am no longer using either of them.

Only...

If I had to name the reason why I can bear the crushing weight of countless glass windows...

“I...am going back...with them.”

It’s faith.

Faith that I’ll save Lapis and my friends, and return to the Office with Mr. Vergilius.

It will keep me secure to the end of my rope.

These kids will break free from their cocoons and come back to us.

Lapis may be enduring immense pain somewhere here, but she won’t let go of the thread of hope.

A massive lance handcrafted by Allas Workshop’s meisters falls into my right hand. In the world where I was a Color, I knew how to wield that workshop’s weapons.

“After...”

The memory vividly imprinted upon each fiber of my muscles shaped my posture into the ideal javelin thrower’s stance.

“...I kill you.”



Creating an explosive shockwave thrashing the eardrums, I outstretched my arm in Jumsoon's direction.

"....."

The lance crashes right in the middle of the glass wall. Jumsoon's brows flinched in response.

The wall began to crack around the workshop weapon and fell to bits with a loud crackle.

"This is rather surprising, this glass...can't be damaged with most weapons..."

I can see Jumsoon's face between the falling shards.

Mild surprise is all you would show. You have no idea how clear and unshakable this faith sustaining me is. You couldn't imagine what it's like when you've lived a life of greed.

But my faith is fervent, aflame.

With the lance now departed, a bat is in my hands. Its heat burns my palms red, sending a wave of searing pain through the skin.

"Ugh..."

But I soon realized that the scorching sensation came from the burn in my heart, not my hands.

This mark was left when I lost what was precious to me, and it ached as I looked to the quietly flickering streetlight.

Then, a spark flown from the fiery anguish landed on me.

Layers of sorrow gently pile up, adding weight to the heap.

Though my mind had wavered, I was able to handle it.

That weighty pile of sorrow turns into anger...

"Speak."

"Hnh..."

...My body was propelled to Jumsoon's vicinity in an instant.

"Speak, damn you!"



The flaming bat whistles towards Jumsoon's head.

The sounds of rushing wind and crackling fire follow after a short interval.

Jumsoon turns to the side to dodge, but I won't give her room to breathe. The bat is swung left, right, and then in a circle before flying downward, yet Jumsoon evades it all with ease.

Only a lingering trail of flame remains in the space.

I can't allow her any quarter.

If this weapon won't work...!

I firmly planted my left leg on the floor, lifting my right leg to swing at Jumsoon.

The Maestro's outfit has a flexibility-enhancing material weaved into it, which allows me to deliver a more powerful kick.

It was wisdom I earned through Maestro Garnet's window.

"Tell me how to bring them back to normal!"

"...!"

The roundhouse kick caught her by surprise. Her reaction wasn't fast enough to get out of its way.

The tip of my foot grazed her side, causing her to stumble.

Still...

"The cocoons..."

It didn't seem to have left a good impact.

She slows and turns her eye to the squirming kids inside the machines again.

I am overcome with unpleasant and appalling emotions.

However...

Now is the time to suppress them.

"What are...!"

I close my eyes, and reach for the stillness in the dark.

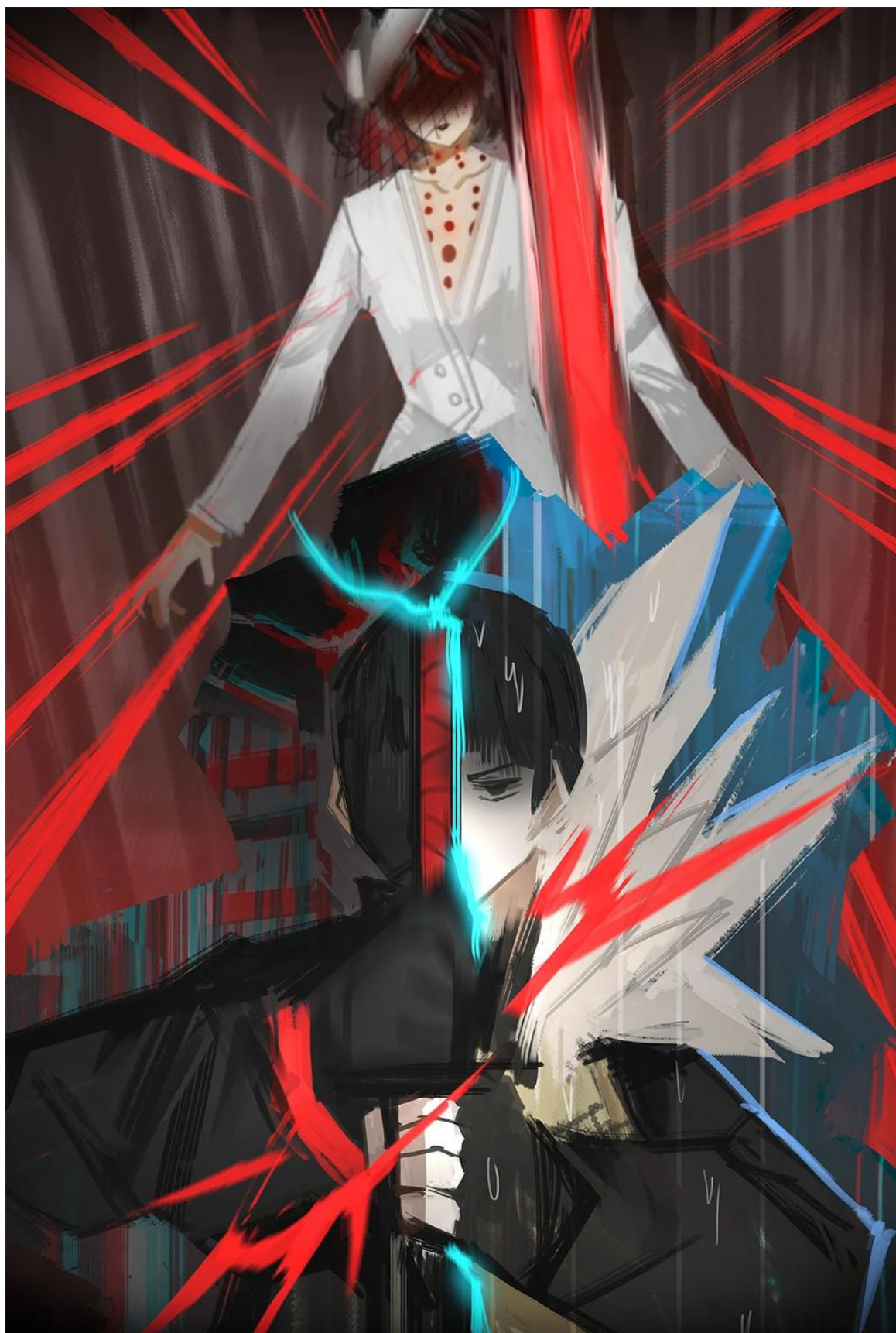
Then, I find a red line, and grasp it.

When I opened my eyes, a red sword was gripped in my right hand.

The blade slashed at Jumsoon like a gale, leaving a crimson trace.

I attacked with the intention to behead her, but she regained her balance quickly, and deftly slipped away from the wall.

But I won't miss her this time.



“Keh...”

The sword’s direction shifted in a quick twist and headed for Jumsoon’s left shoulder.

The sturdiness and flexibility of the Maestro’s outfit meant a sudden slash like this was unlikely to cut through, but...

In the world where I was a director at an Association, I never once failed to slay a target with whom I made contact.

An arm lopped off with its shoulder tumbled to the floor.

“Will you open up after I take your other arm?”

I was surprised by the way I spoke.

I never thought I was capable of saying things like this. Threats or intimidation were usually a job for experienced Fixers like Rikako or Denver.

However, once I gave a lashing from my own tongue, I could see that it was another part of the struggle to stay alive.

It wasn’t a boastful display of expertise or the symptom of a cold and uncaring heart.

“Fuhu. To tell you the truth, those cocoons...are new to me, too.”

Even though she had just lost an arm, Jumsoon’s face still maintains an arrogant composure.

It doesn’t change that she’s at a disadvantage. That much was clear.

The tide of the battle should have turned in my favor with this. She has to be barely keeping herself up from the amount of blood she’s losing, but Jumsoon’s gleeful smile won’t leave her face.

“My dear Garnet, I’m sorry to disappoint your desperation, but...it’s hard not to divert my attention to those curiosities.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Who else could have...”

“At some point—”

Aseah interrupted the conversation and began talking.

It was in complete disregard of the fight that was taking place, or even the possibility that the sword I’m wielding or the other weapons in the scene might be pointed at him at any moment.

He continues to talk as if such fears were redundant.

“At some point, chrysaloid or ovoid transformations such as these began occurring on rare occasions after a failed test. Previously, all the failed subjects would do is shatter to pieces.”

“What are you...”

“It started happening around... the second passing of the White Nights, presumably. What is intriguing is that natural occurrences of this phenomenon have also been reported, completely unrelated to our experiments.”

I couldn't understand.

“You didn't make them that way on purpose...?”

“We? For what? Oh, Garnet... Why would we ever partake in the worthless endeavor of encasing precious raw stones in those fleshy sacks?”

“But then...those cocoons...”

“I've yet to hear of any cases where subjects went back to their pre-cocooned state. While there have been attempts to forcibly open the chrysalides, the results were rather abysmal. Hm, they seemed to undergo a 'mutation' of sorts once cocooned.”

What.

Why are you so apathetic about it?

Aren't you saying those kids have no way to go back to normal?

“Well... It is what it is.”

“You never know, the metamorphoses might yield even more valuable gems...”

You mean, there really is no way to turn them back.

Is that right?

No, it can't be.

Whatever it takes...

“Do whatever it takes to turn them back!!!”



I embrace silence.

In my hand is a revolver. Like a skilled hunter, I have complete mastery of this weapon I've never used before.

I pull the trigger without cocking the hammer to fire six shots. Two of them manage to land on Jumsoon's upper body, but they fail to penetrate the clothing and bounce off as crumpled nuggets of lead.

"Tsk."

I push the cylinder outward to expel the spent casings. My other hand reached for my waist, only to notice that I have no reserve ammo. The gun, having outlived its usefulness, is tossed at Jumsoon.

I see the lance I threw at the glass wall now stuck on the floor. There was no need to think about what to do—I thrust it deep in my enemy's direction.

She dodged? No, I won't let her again.

A huge hammer is placed in my hands, and it ruthlessly slams into the ground where Jumsoon would have moved.

She stepped back? Then the longsword should do it. A blade much taller than my height draws a large arc along the horizon, cutting across the hammer and lance lodged in the floor.

More, I still need more.

A Ranga dagger in my right hand, an Allas gauntlet in my left.

I leap forward to see Jumsoon's infuriating mug, still showing no signs of panic. I jab a plate of steel into it, and strike forth an edge of wrought iron.

But she evades them. She dodges them all. That slimy crook won't let me hit her once!

Why? I should have mastered these weapons, but it feels like my body can't replicate half of my knowledge.

"Gnh..."

I can't stop here. I fling the dagger, aiming for her heart. Alas, it's blocked by Jumsoon's weapon, held with her one arm. I'll need something more effective, something other than the ones I've dropped on the ground.

Now I hold a heavy mace. I viciously swing it to drive Jumsoon into a corner where she can't escape.

She's cornered without a doubt. Though I haven't managed to land a clean hit or make her visibly tense, that won't go on for long.

The shotgun will do well against a cornered target. A curtain of black and white projectiles shower Jumsoon's body. Pellets, slugs, occasional flashes and flames. After emptying the barrel, I toss the shotgun away and summon the greatsword, striking downward from head to toe.

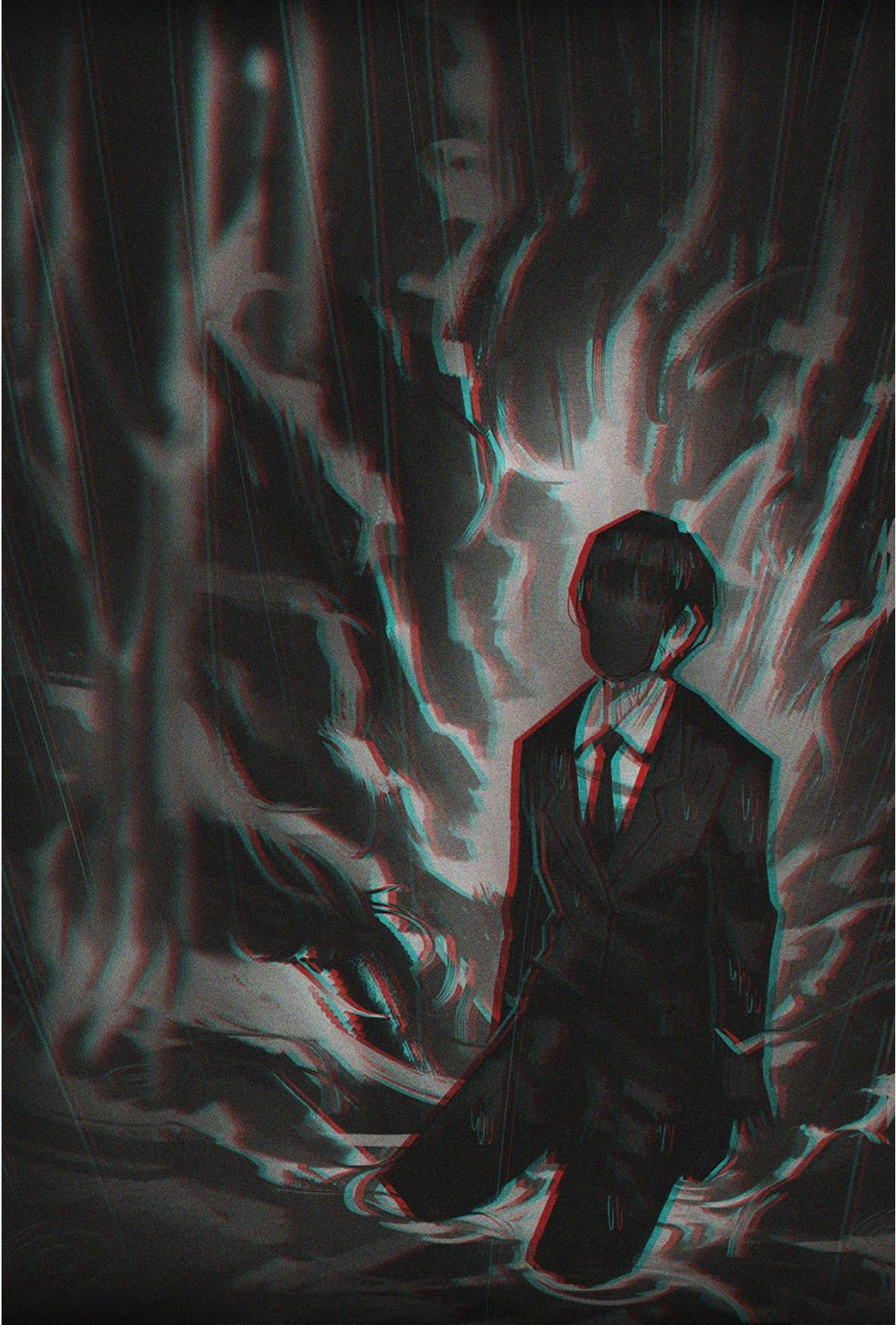
"Huff, gaah... Haff."

Silver casings roll around the floor along with empty shells. The smell of gunpowder rising from the spent ammo blends with the dust from broken tiles and walls, filling the room with odor.

My last weapon will be Durandal; it will be her death sentence.

With this one final blow, I will end Jumsoon's life.

Alas.



“Ah...”

And then what?

What’s the point when it won’t bring Lapis back?

Suddenly, a mournful question rings in my mind. Lapis, she who was reduced to piano notes and scattered in the wind. The woman who will no longer turn up even if I wait day and night. The woman who is gone in every sense, leaving not a gentle breeze as she passed.

The rest of my life will be shrouded in horrible darkness. Nothing will console me. In my world, gone forever pitch-black... sorrow will be the one thing staring straight into me.

So it will all be the same, even if I break this string of wrath before my eyes.

Nothing will change for me even if I brandish my sword for a better tomorrow, for you are trapped in the past, unable to join me in the present.

No matter how far I go, all that awaits will be graves.

Durandal didn’t come.

And at last...

As though shells are being taken off, I am returned to the man I originally was. The air around me wavers with the heat leaving my body. While I kept pulling out weapons to attack with, the burden on my heart grew, and eventually, the reflections fell off layer after layer.

“Ahh...done already?”

Seeing me stop dead in my tracks, Jumsoon raises her weapon with one arm. All that onslaught was for naught. I was helpless against her assault, having lost the strength to fight back.



“Ah.”

“What I need...is that brain of yours. I promise to show you even more worlds through reflections.”

“I hope you don’t mind, my Garnet?”

I thought I could get back to my feet, but it was no use. My legs were sprawled on the other side of the room, broken and tattered.

“... ..”

The lids of laboratory pods open one by one, letting out shrieks.

I dragged myself along the floor with my hands to take a closer look.



What emerged from the cocoons were neither butterflies nor friends. They were... things, doing nothing other than screaming, crawling. One after another, things unknown to me were escaping the machines.

"Ahh...?"

Everything crashed to an end.

Those beings crying in an unrecognizable language had not an ounce of possible humanity left in them.

I get the feeling that I've been through this before. At least, a darkly stained Garnet behind one of the windows has.

The inability to do anything... An endless despair.

...Overwhelmed by that emotion, I retreated inward.

I was subject to constant pressure.

The weight of cumulous glass panes finally sinks in. Curses screamed by my selves from numerous worlds press down on me all at once. Bent, shrunk, and warped was my mind, having nowhere to fall back.

I want to regress, back into the void where I would feel nothing.

Tak.

I'm reminded of that rainy day. Feelings rise up against my will like dead fish floating to the surface belly-up.

Of course, that unwillingness itself had long diminished.

Tak.

Creepy and foul music enveloping the City passes my eardrums and drops off into my heart with such force that it could erode.

Tak.

The suffocating emotions I felt that day constantly strangle me.

My friends hid into cocoons.

I want to hide as they did.

Tak.

But then they crawl out.

What emerged were...

Indescribable beings.

'Friends.'

Plunk.

Sorry, everyone... I was... too late...

Let's...stop here, I think it's enough.

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"No, Garnet! This can't be... How can this be...!"

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Shouts coming from 'outside' grow faint.

I slowly close my eyes, hoping they won't open again.

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“Why must you of all gems go inside a cocoon?”

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I hope no one comes looking for me.

This will be a comfort I won't give up.

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“Aseah! Explain to me—just what is this cocoon... and why does it have to ruin our experiments?”

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Ah.

It was so simple after all.

It was as simple as abandoning myself. There was nothing more to it than closing my eyes and leaving my body for hungered sins to feast on.

Like that, I curled up in a tiny little world.

And inside, I faced...

The fires of guilt extending an arm to shake my hand.

